DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 196 023 CS 206 019

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TITLE Humor in Advertising: The Language Pun.
PUB DATE Oct 80
NOTE 15p.: Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Rocky Mountain Modern Language Association (34th, Denver, CO, October 16-18, 1980).

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Advertising: Audiences: Figurative Language: *Humor: Language Usage: Mass Media: *Puns; Semantics: Television Commercials
IDENTIFIERS *Audience Response

ABSTRACT

While it is fashionable to use the semantic pun in advertising (for example, the meaning extension in "dollars and sense"), a lot of this humor slips past the American reader; not only unintentional bloopers that get past the proofreader but also intentional puns that escape the audience. Advertising humor has other pitfalls as well--the public may enjoy the ad but fail to remember the product or they may be offended by an ad. Consequently, humor is almost taboo in many advertising circles. Nevertheless, humor in advertising has at times been very successful. Humorous advertising has the greatest chance of success by abandoning the mass audience campaign and catering instead to segmented audiences, and by appealing to their desire for distinction and superiority. The advertising pun is somewhat like poetry or art: the greater the audience, the less value it has and the smaller the audience, the more personal it becomes. (HTH)

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Humor in Advertising: the Language Pun

Paper read to the Rocky Mountain Modern Language Association Meeting in Denver, Colorado, October 16-18, 1980.

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Going through school during the heyday of transformational grammar, I naturally had to be concerned about the shooting of the hunters and the problems entailed by visiting relatives and flying planes. We also had the lamb that was too hot to eat and the man who had had his car stolen. An earlier exercise was to compare the advantages of immediate constituent analysis with the old Reed-Kellogg diagrams using the lady who fed her dog biscuits. After Chomsky came Fillmore and the case grammarians who were filling their trucks with shovels and the generative semanticists who were causing Mary to die, almost, that is. In teaching English syntax I have used many such sentences to amuse and hopefully arouse the interest of foreign as well as American students.

While syntactic ambiguities have been the playthings of linguists, the more prevalent ambiguity is, of course, found in semantics. Strictly speaking, we should speak of a lexical pun or double meaning rather than ambiguity. Note that whereas a syntactic ambiguity usually involves opposite meanings, a

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lexical pun involves a meaning extension rather than meaning opposite. In some of the above examples we see subject versus object or active versus passive; we note positive versus negative in 'I will force you to marry no one' and 'Mary didn't clean the house'; we see restrictive-non-restrictive in 'my vegetarian brother is in the hospital.'

It is meaning extension which is used in the lexical pun in advertising humor, such as, 'Pity the poor soles with no McGregor socks,' or 'We're courting new members now' (Tucson Athletic Club), and the cliché 'Dollars and sense,' which is so time-worn that the other day I even heard it in a U.S.-government-sponsored advertisement.

This type of semantic pun is the basis for much of our humor. Pity the poor foreign student who upon congratulating himself on understanding one meaning then learns that to make any sense of it all he has to cope with one additional meaning. I think of the foreign student who on being asked at dinner if he would like a second helping answered, 'No, thanks, I'm fed up.'

We are surrounded by examples of humor in the semantic pun. It has become fashionable to employ them ad nauseam in newspaper headlines, which particularly lend themselves to such, and there are record and book collections of unintentional bloopers from respectively both radio-television and the newspapers.

But if much of such humor is incomprehensible to the foreign student, there is apparently a lot that escapes the

American reader. There are not only unintentional bloopers which slip past the proofreader but also intentional puns which escape many readers or listeners. How many are there who are able to catch the literary allusion in 'What makes SAMI run?' (U.S. Shoe Manufacturing Company's Semi-Automatic Multiple Inserter) or the double meaning of 'culture' in, 'What happens when an American eats Yoplait Yoghurt? He gets a little touch of French culture.' (It is nevertheless a good as well as entertaining commercial.) And how many people coming to Arizona are able to understand the connotations of 'territory' in Tucson Realty & Trust's 'It's still our territory.'

Humor in advertising has many pitfalls, and there have been famous flops. The public might enjoy the ad but fail to remember the product. Or the public might be offended; bordering the vulgar are,

> Is your wife cold? (National Fuel Oil Institute)
>
> Bring us your cans! (seductive girl on billboard; RECYCO--- Tucson Recycling Co.)
>
> Have you ever done it the French way? (provocative bikini-clad girl; Air France)
>
> Get off your can, get on the stick. (Mennon)
>
> Avoid falsies! (photo close-up of false teeth; Bergen Community College advertising dental checkups)
>
> Does she . . . or doesn't she? (Clairol)

The earliest deodorant ad was J. Walter Thompson's drawing of a woman with her seductive arms around a man and the

headline, 'Within the curve of a woman's arm' (Odorono); in 1919 this ad cost the Lady's Home Journal some 200 canceled subscriptions. (You've come a long way, baby!) One unintentional pun that actually got launched was 'Reach for the best balls in Britain!' (Malt-teasers candy).

Other ad headlines are, in the ad industry, sarcastically labeled 'treasures': note Havoline Oil's 'For a new high use Havoline' (with photo of pole vaulter)---what's the relevance of either pole vaulting or taking drugs to a motor oil?; 'Quit tooling around' was the Michigan Tool Company's way of fooling around, and other headlines, 'We'd rather freight than switch' (Missouri Pacific - Texas & Pacific) and 'Never trust an air-freight company under 30' (Emery Air Freight) similarly are teasers which don't tease but which leave the reader with a so-what attitude.

Advertising copy can be deliberately misleading as in 'Arrid is one-and-one-half times as effective as any other leading deodorant tested'; such phrasing at least used to be a more common practice. And you can't argue with one meaning of 'No heat is cheaper than oil' (National Fuel Oil Institute) and 'Kills fleas and ticks for five months' (Hart's 2-in-1 plus collar).

In many advertising circles humor is, as a consequence, almost taboo; it's controversial always because, as we've seen, much of the public will not grasp it, the advertising may be offensive, or it may be entertaining but too cute to sell anything. It's tricky and it's dangerous.

I've been amused by this controversy over the use of humor in advertising. Humor in advertising is referred to as 'creativity'; the American Academy of Advertising's publication, the Journal of Advertising, which is advertising's philosophical forum, has been filled with this polemic. We can stereotype the protagonists. There is the dogged, determined Fuller-Brush-salesman-turned-ad-executive as opposed to the brash and precocious, former English major. A president of Batten, Barton, Durstine, & Osborne (Tom Dillon) entitled an article 'The Triumph of Creativity Over Communication,' noting that 'writers and art directors are not typical of the mass market, and the things which interest them do not necessarily interest the mass market.'[1] In his book Realities of Advertising, Rosser Reeves pictures copywriters as a group of frustrated literary people who want to have fun with words regardless of what it does to their sponsor's sales.[2] Benton & Bowles noted in an ad, famous in the industry, that advertising is 'not an art form but a serious business tool.'[3] Entertainment in advertising is attacked, along with the proliferation of advertising awards, which reward artists and creative writers rather than peddlers of straightforward, honest copy that sells. The slogan of Benton & Bowles is: 'It's not creative unless it sells.'

The use of humor in advertising has nevertheless at times been very successful. Humor, or creativity, is, of course, not necessarily a linguistic pun. What often passes for humor may be mere absurdity rather than the clever use of language.

Conversely, the language pun may not entail humor. Merrill-Lynch's 'breed-apart' campaign hardly provokes laughter. But we do admire and smile at a clever double-entendre.

Ideally the advertising pun is a succinct way of presenting two messages in one, e.g.:

It's the best detergent on American soil. (Tide)
Use Reynolds Wrap - the best wrap around.
Aluminum can and Reynolds does.
Datsun: We are driven!
We make it simple. (Honda)
Kawasaki makes the good times roll.
Wee care for your children. (Tucson Day Care Center)
The best-dressed salads wear Seven Seas.
America sparkles with Canada Dry.
Paul Masson will serve no wine before its time.
Let us meat your freezer. (Schulz the Butcher; Tucson, AZ)

A frequent device is to create product association by reference to a proverb or cliché; the pun is in the use of both the literal and figurative meanings, although the latter may be irrelevant. Note Morton Salt's 'When it rains it pours'; the proverb is hopefully to make us remember the literal meaning as applied to salt. Other examples include,

We don't cut corners. (Hartmann Luggage)
Keep your cool with Carrier.
What's buggin' you today? (General Exterminating Company; Erie, Pennsylvania)

The President doesn't make a move without them. (CBS White House reporters)

Stop Stalling; see your car dealer and your Valley National Bank. (Arizona)

Be a star in a Western! (Western Airlines)

Get a free scope with your Daisy .22; you'll be a darn sight better off!

Gatorade: What more could a body ask for?

Cigarette? No, thanks. I can live without it. (American Lung Association)

Curtis Mathes has an offer that will knock you off your your feet! (free remote control tuner)

Bill Schulz - Energy for the 80's (political campaign)

A preoccupation of structuralist linguistics was the phoneme and the minimal pair. The needless proof that this is no linguists' secret but a commonly-perceived psychological reality is found in many examples:

Grime doesn't pay. (Electrical Homes)

This is the way the English keep their gin up. (Gordon's)

The racer's edge. (STP oil)

It's one way we can help you with the high cost of leaving. (PSA)

Every litter bit hurts.

Note in the above the voicing distinctions in 'grime' and 'crime,' 'gin' and 'chin,' and 'razor' with 'racer.'

Then there are examples of the phoneme and zero contrast, as in:

Fact, not friction. (Arco Oil)

Frito's Cornflakes make lunch munch better.

Olive it up. (Spanish Olives)

(The 'O' in 'Olive' was customarily pictured as an olive.)

Walter E. Heller will help your company get where it's growing. (loan company)

The shorter the cliché the less predictable a word; hence the requirement that the distinction be minimal. If the cliché expression is somewhat longer, a minimal pair is no longer required, e.g. 'typing' and 'trying' and 'breath' versus 'death.' Or a very different word may be substituted; note 'see' versus 'hear' and 'miles' versus 'years.' The above four are seen in,

How to succeed in business without really typing. (IBM)

It's a matter of life and breath. (American Lung Association)

You should hear what you're missing. (American Hearing Society)

Dutch Boy paints more years to the gallon.

Product slogans began appearing in the 1880's and 1890's, and they quickly proliferated. The pitch was straightforward, however, with little 'creativity.' But in 1907 at three o'clock one morning an adman thought up Fisk Tires' 'Time to re-tire'---a sure-enough pun, though what's the relevance of going to bed and buying tires? The pun didn't go into print until 1914, one year after Morton Salt's proverb. Other

early slogan puns were Sherwin-Williams' 'Covers the Earth' and 'I'd walk a mile for a camel.'

In contrast to most of the above, which are short and catchy, we frequently find a language pun in the teaser headline, an attempt to get the reader to read the body of the ad, though only about 25% of readers fall for the teaser. Such headlines are customarily provocative and frequently informational. Out of World War II came examples which ideally related product and the war effort. The most famous were 'Idle words make busy subs---keep it under your Stetson' and Pabst Beer's toast, 'To the Jap Navy---bottoms up.' Even the government came up with 'Be like Dad---keep Mum'; the oil companies asked us to 'Get in the scrap---bring in your scrap rubber now!' And Revere Copper came up with 'Lend a hand---he gave one' (with photograph of amputee). Advertising agencies often had the strange task of getting people not to buy but to remember the product name.

In most cases, as in the Revere Copper ad, the teaser headline requires a visual complement to complete the pun. Additional examples of picture complements include,

> What some people do to their feet is simply shocking! (photo of jogger's foot hitting ground; Scholl-Sports Cushions)
>
> Festive evenings often start with Red. (photo of lobster and Johnny Walker Red)
>
> Let's not blow it, America! (photo of flickering candle; Alliance to Save Energy)
>
> Take one home to mother. (photo of plane; American Airlines)

She gets her look from her father. (photo of battered child's face; Odyssey House---against child abuse)

Never in the history of mankind has so little done so much for so many. (photo of girl in bathing suit; Cole of California)

Lip service. (photo close-up of lips; Germaine Monteil lipstick)

Very often a contract will contain a series of humorous ads; we note the highly acclaimed examples for Talon Zipper:

Fly for profit. (photo of fly)

On her last flight across the country, Joanne Michaels got stuck in mid-air. (with photo)

The minute Ron Becker stepped off the train, his zipper went off the track. (with photo)

We're going to fly you like you've never been flyed before. (with photo)

And for the Santa Barbara National Bank:

The next time you find yourself up a creek, we might have just the thing you need. (photo of paddle)

A trip to Europe might be just what you need to put a little spring into your summer. (photo of long spring)

If you're looking at an expensive new piano, maybe we can help you face the music. (photo of piano)

We now come to some good examples of double-punning; note the puns on both 'Dutch treat' and 'putt' (or 'put'):

A real Dutch treat; come in---putt one away. (Batavus, the motorized bike from Holland)

On 'Saturday night special' and 'heartburn':

The Saturday night special (photo of pistol on plate with knife, fork), major cause of heartburn. (Committee for the Study of Handgun Misuse)

On 'Tucson Sky' and 'strikes' (referring to Tucson's now-defunct volleyball team):

This summer the Tucson Sky strikes again---and again! (photo of lightning-filled Tucson summer monsoon sky; Tucson Sky Professional Volleyball)

On 'By George' and 'quarter':

By George, what a quarter! (photo of GW 25¢ piece; Redbook's first quarter report)

And on 'gold' and 'bar' (this came out in January 1975, just after it became legal in the U.S. to own gold):

Now there are two kinds of gold you can buy in bars. (photo of 'Johnny Walker' inscribed on bar of gold)

Here, however, we've been looking at headlines rather than slogans. Timing and topicalization are important, and the headlines are often absurd humor---what is called 'ad wearout' is instantaneous. Such an ad can't run month after month, the way a TV ad does. It's a one-shot affair, albeit a very effective one. One readily sees why production costs prohibit the use of such humor on TV. We are unfortunately in the rut of the extremely expensive, thirty-second commercial. Shorter commercials would be cheaper, could be changed more frequently, and would permit more humor.

But something else has been happening in advertising. We have previously had the sales pitch going out to the lowest common denominator. There is one school of advertising which has no interest in the reputation or quality of advertising, or how demeaning advertising can be to viewer, listener, or reader. Advertising can antagonize; it matters not, since the only criterion is how well the product sells.

On the other hand, we have seen the demise of many national publications and in turn the flourishing of special interest journals. Relatively the same phenomenon has occurred with radio, and now with the advent of cable television and other video media, it appears likely that such audiences will become increasingly segmented according to taste and education. This means, as we have seen in magazines, that commercials must become more sensitive to special interest groups.

John O'Toole, one of the few arguing for creativity and for audience segmentation research---as opposed to the hard-sell types mentioned earlier---writes in the Journal of Advertising that even in selling the same product there should be no common denominator in respect to the ad. Levis are not sold the same way in Seventeen as in farm journals. In effect the change is that advertising is no longer about products but rather 'about a person's life and how a product can fit into that life to make it better.'[4]

What also requires a departure from the mass audience campaign is that certain products are purchased not out of emulation but rather because of a desire to be different. In

the ad industry it's called 'product positioning'---remember VW's startling and very successful dare-to-be-different campaign: 'Think small,' one ad ran. You may remember that if you were driving your bug around and you saw another bug, you honked your horn. The VW campaign was like the product itself in that it ran against the current of commonly perceived taste.

One cannot cater to a common denominator if ownership is to mark one not as richer but rather distinct from others in having better taste or in having unique or unusual interests. Instead of products it is predicted that in the future there will be more selling of specialized services. What is purchased and how it is advertised are both going to be designed more specifically for narrow consumer groupings. Ad men have already started to refer to 'narrowcasting' instead of broadcasting.

And this is where humor in advertising has, I think, a greater chance for success, why we'll see more of it. Humor can be characterized as involving a sense of superiority. It takes a greater awareness to appreciate two meanings rather than merely one. Every in-group has its own vocabulary and its own humor; note the cartoons in trade journals and house organs. The advertising pun is somewhat like poetry, art, or whatever---the greater the audience the less value it has, and the smaller the audience the more personal it becomes. As services and media specialize, we can hope that advertising will reach for our intelligence rather than for our nerves.

# # #

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